6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7

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[Title Page]

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7

# Suicide Among the Matako of the Argentine Gran Chaco

By Alfred Metraux
(Estados Unidos)

## Sumario

**La facilidad con que los Indios Matako del Gran Chaco argentino se suicidan es un fenómeno sociológico de sumo interés y que merece nuestra atención. Los suicidios en esta tribu asumen frecuentemente el carácter de una epidemia y han causado grandes preocupaciones a los misioneros británicos que han tomado a estos Indios bajo su protección. El suicidio entre los Matako afecta una forma estrictamente definida por la tradición. Estos Indios se envenenan con las frutas de la sachasandia (CAPPARIS SALICIFOLIA, GRISEB), un árbol común en el Chaco. Esta misma fruta secada y hervida en seis o siete aguas constituye un alimento de cierta importancia durante los meses de carestía en el invierno. Los síntomas del envenenamiento son fáciles de diagnosticar y, si el caso es tratado a tiempo, la muerte puede evitarse mediante inyecciones de morfina o la absorción de un emético. Los que realmente comen las frutas de la sachasandia con la intención de morir lo hacen con mucho sigilo y toman sus disposiciones para que los síntomas se manifiesten durante la noche cuando nadie los pueda observar y prestar ayuda. En general, despechos amorosos, incompatibilidad de humor entre gente casada y frustración sexual parecen ser la causa directa de estos suicidios. Son muy comunes en la época del año cuando los jóvenes se reúnen al anochecer para bailar y cuando se inician la mayor parte de las intrigas amorosas. La relación entre el número de suicidios y los bailes nativos fué observada por los misioneros que trataron de combatir el mal prohibiendo las danzas, y persuadiendo a los neófitos que los bailes nativos eran malos bajo todos los aspectos. Sin embargo se han notado también muchos casos de suicidios entre los niños que van a la escuela misionera, a raíz de una amonestación del maestro. Los misioneros tienen la impresión que el suicidio es tan común entre los hombres como entre las mujeres, tal vez con cierta preponderancia entre los primeros. Por lo general son los jóvenes quienes atentan a su vida. Estas epidemias de suicidio no son cosa nueva entre los Indios, pero los misioneros aseguran que el número de suicidios aumentó cuando iniciaron su obra en la región.**

**Hay en estos suicidios un elemento de exhibicionismo y de ostentación. Muchas de las presuntas víctimas no toman una dosis de veneno suficiente para causar la muerte y otras simulan los síntomas. No cabe duda que el suicidio tiene un fuerte carácter agresivo. Muchos individuos usan del suicidio como de una arma; al matarse uno se venga de quien lo ofendió. A pesar de que en la vida diaria no se notan tendencias agresivas, no se puede dudar que haya un estado de agresión latente dentro de la comunidad. Estas tendencias agresivas se manifestaban antaño en partidas de hockey, en las borracheras colectivas, en la práctica de la hechicería y por supuesto en la guerra. Hoy en día no existen estos desahogos, ya que todas las actividades que daban cierto sabor a la vida han desaparecido o están prohibidas por los misioneros. El suicidio puede ser una vía de escape para**

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



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estos indios que están acosados por una situación económica de día en día más difícil y que fuera de las misiones están sometidos a múltiples vejámenes y humillaciones. No obstante no se han observado crisis de suicidio entre los demás indios del Chaco argentino que viven bajo condiciones igualmente desfavorables. Hay también indicios de que los casos de suicidio eran comunes al principio de la era de las misiones y esto puede hacernos suponer que el suicidio era la expresión tradicional de la agresión en contra de los miembros de su grupo contra los cuales el individuo no podía vengarse en otra forma. El ejemplo dado por un suicida se hace contagioso y de allí nacen epidemias esporádicas de envenenamiento.

767 The high rate of suicide among the Matako Indians of the Argentine Gran Chaco is a social phenomenon well worth our attention. In this tribe suicide at times assumes the character of an epidemic that causes havoc among the people and is a serious problem for the [197] English missionaries who have several stations along the Bermejo and Pilcomayo Rivers. To these missionaries, especially to Dr. Collins [115] Smith and J. White, I am indebted for most of my information on the suicidal mania that has flared up on several occasions during the past ten years. Personally, I have witnessed only one case. Information about suicide among the Matako who live in the bush or as miserable hilotes around the white settlements is not available, but there is little doubt that if the Matako in the missions are so prone to take their lives, those who find themselves exposed to hunger and mistreatment will be even more inclined to end their days wilfully.

Suicide among the Matako takes a strictly patternized form. In all cases known to me, the victims poisoned themselves by eating the [824] fruits of the sachasandia (Capparis salicifolia Griseb). This fruit, the size of a walnut, grows on a tree which is very common in the Chaco region between the Bermejo and Pilcomayo Rivers. It ripens in December, the period which coincides with the largest number of 262 suicides. Strangely enough, the sachasandia is also an important food for the chaco Indians; it is collected in the summer, dried in 251 the sun and stored in caraguata bags to be consumed during the lean winter months. Even dried these fruits are extremely poisonous and 252 before eating them the Indians boil them six or seven times in different waters.

The clinical symptoms of sachasandia poisoning are: convulsions, 762 foaming at the mouth and, finally, coma. The heart beat becomes 764 jerky with short stops and upsurges of activity. The muscles of the throat are affected with paralysis and the patient makes a gurgling sound. When paralysis sets in, no emitic can be taken orally. The last phase of the agony is characterized by jumpy motions of the body

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



and jerky contractions. A strong diarrhea is also a concomittant effect of the poisoning.

Those who have been saved by prompt medical treatment (injection or morphine) describe their symptoms as follows: At first they feel considerably depressed, then they grow more and more dizzy "as if the world were going head over heels". The dizzines increases until the victim is forced to lie down.

It is apparent from the cases cited here that suicide among the Matako does not always take a collective form, but it may frequently do so. Death by suicide appears to be a temptation to which individuals yield with amazing facility and which is often contagious.

*Case Histories*

The very day I arrived at the Mission of San Andrés on the Upper Pilcomayo I was made aware of the frequency of suicide by poisoning. A young Indian in the mission suddenly took sick. (He was suffering from malaria.) At the first sign of his illness, his family rushed to the missionary to tell him the young man had eaten sachasandia and to ask for prompt help.

Later there was a real alarm when a young woman actually did attempt to kill herself. The woman had a lover who lived in another village with his wife and two children. The man's grandmother (Mother's mother) feared that he might desert his family and took steps to prevent such a disgrace. For this reason she called on the missionary and urged him to interfere. The missionary talked to the girl's parents and learned from them that the girl's lover often stayed at their home. A few days before the young woman had gone to her lover's village and had snatched a knife and other goods from his house. When she returned to her home, she demanded a compensation before she would break off relations with the man. Afterwards she suddenly left home and went to call on distant relatives in whose house she went to sleep. When these people wanted to send her back, they were unable to wake her. An old woman noticed a faint smell of sachasandia on her breath and immediately sent for the missionary. The limbs of the patient were already twitching, her mouth rigid. After an injection of morphine she began to vomit and so recovered.

*Second Case.* At another mission a 16 year old orphan committed suicide. The girl had had several love affairs but had formed no stable tie with a man. Finally she ate sachasandia and, since no one came to her assistance, died in the middle of the village. A woman took the dead orphan's head on her lap and her distant relatives wailed the whole day and night. Afterwards, however, the body was left

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



naked on the plaza where the small children could throw stones at it and the hungry dogs could lick it. No one apparently wanted to touch the corpse and when the missionary ordered the Indians to bury it, they merely removed the remains to the bush but did not bother to dig a grave. The missionary attributed the people's indifference to the fact that the girl had no close relatives and that she was ill-tempered. According to the Indians, her bad disposition was also the cause of her unhappy love life.

*Third case.* A boy of 16 and his 14 year old wife often quarreled until, finally, the boy commited suicide. The girl at first appeared unconcerned but later joined in the death wailing. Soon afterwards she became depressed because some of the people held her responsible for her husband's death. Three days later she ate sachasandia fruit late in the afternoon expecting that the poison would take effect when she slept and when no one would detect her condition. She was discovered, however, and the missionary, who was called in great haste, was able to save her life. Although her parents reacted with concern, they seemed less disturbed than her parents in-law.

*Fourth case.* The cause for Teresa's attempted suicide was sexual frustration. This girl was about 13 years old and, since she had already menstruated, was considered to be an adult. She was extremely anxious to find a husband but all the young men were already married. Out of sheer desperation she set out for Espinillo, a village near her camp, hoping to attract the attention of the Argentine settlers there. Her relatives, however, prevented her from carrying out this project. As a result she became very despondent and finally ate sachasandia. When she felt the worst effects of the poison she became panic-stricken and went herself to the dispensary to get an emetic, which saved her life. Her widowed mother was deeply concerned and could not be persuaded that the girl would recover. During her daughter's illness, she often woke the girl from sleep, fearing that she might actually be dead.

*Fifth case.* Manuel, a boy of about 17, was married to an illtempered girl who at that time was pregnant by him. Tiring of her sharp tongue, he abandoned her and married another girl, Manuela. His first wife refused to resign herself to the new situation and continually quarreled with her former husband and his new wife. Her aggressiveness so depressed the couple that both decided to take poison to escape the vituperations of the incensed woman. In this case no one seemed particularly affected by the attempted suicide, perhaps because neither of the victims had living parents. It was a small child who warned the missionary in the middle of the night. The missionary

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



forced the already uncounscious patients to swallow salt water and so to vomit the poison, but as soon as they came to themselves they struggled against the missionary in their will to die. Their resistance to care was overcome only with the help of several other persons. Both of them recovered but remained depressed for a long time afterwards.

Shortly after these events the deserted wife gave birth to a boy. She evinced no interest in the baby and wanted to kill him. The child's grandmother and other relatives, especially the women, opposed her intention and brought the baby to the missionary who tried without decided to resort to bribery and laid before the mother cloth and corn from the store, which he promised to give her if she suckled the baby. To this temptation the woman finally yielded. As soon as she had suckled the boy his life was safe, for a woman never kills an infant once she has nursed it.

*Sixth case.* Here the main character in the drama was Ipatsi, a 17 year old girl. She was an orphan whose sole relative in the village was a classificatory grandmother. She and her husband (25 years old) were incongenial and quarreled almost constantly. Then one day she poisoned herself. Her grandmother, who noticed the effects of the sachasandia late the same evening, sent a child to inform the missionary in charge. He arrived soon afterwards and found the girl conscious but very weak. She was crying hysterically. A few women who were standing nearby watched the scene in a detached way. Her husband sat on the edge of the bed, but seemed sulky and indifferent to her plight. Thanks to an emetic, she recovered. A few days later she departed from the her husband, despite the fact that she had given birth to a child.

*Seventh case.* Bertie, a boy of 14, ate sachasandia three times in one week and each time was saved by the missionary. He himself gave the following explanation for his attempted suicide. Teresa, whose case was described above, had cast her eyes upon him although he was distantly related to her. The boy's father encouraged her and insisted that Bertie marry her although he showed the greatest reluctance and insisted that he was still a child. Neither the girl nor his father would listen to him so that the boy had no peace and "could not sleep at night". At last he took poison. His plight aroused little sympathy except in his elder sister and, of course, in Teresa. The father died soon after the attempted suicide and so Bertie did not have to marry Teresa.

*Eight case.* The victim was a boy of 16 whose bright and cheerful disposition made him generally popular. He had joined the mission

avail to persuade the mother to receive her child. The missionary

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



159 762 together with his people but, after some difficulties with his young wife, took poison and died.

*Ninth case.* Martin, a 15 year old boy, was the kitchen boy of the mission and had always been a cheerful and willing worker. One day he told the missionary that he was married. From that time on, he looked troubled and became restless. Later the missionary was told that Martin did not like the girl with whom he lived but that the girl, who had a forceful character, would not permit him to leave her. Finally, depressed and broken, Martin told the missionary about his unhappy situation. He was advised to separate from his wife and determined to do so. Despite this resolution, he remained with her; to excuse himself he explained that every time he wanted to tell her to go away, "he would become weak all over and could say nothing". His own words were, "Then I go all weak and sleep with her".

The quarreling continued and things went from bad to worse. About this time Martin and his brother killed a cow that belonged to a white settler. The missionary, of course, learned about the theft. Knowing that the missionary would be angry, Martin left the kitchen and refused to return. In a state of utter dejection, he took poison but was saved by the missionary.

Two or three days later, during a quarrel over some meat, his elder brother struck him in the face. Angry and humiliated by the blow, the boy went to the forest and secretly ate sachasandia. In the evening he returned to the missionary who only noticed that one of his eyes was swollen and badly bruised. He was more depressed than ever and sighed on and on. Finally he took the missionary's hand, said goodby and, with another sigh, went home. When the missionary was called to his bedside, it was too late. He died the same night.

Martin had re-married a few days before his death. His new wife was a nice girl of about 14 years. She discovered his condition early in the night and tried to persuade his father to fetch the missionary. The old man slept on and paid no attention. When it was already too late, the boy's mother asked for help, but the father remained indifferent throughout. The moment the boy was dead, his mother squatted down, laid his head on her knees and started the death wailing, "My [764] son, my son, my son...". The other women joined in the lament. The next day the father beat his drum without stopping.

*Tenth case.* This attempt at suicide was made by an old woman of some 50 years, who had grown children and grandchildren. One of her sons was Martin, whose death was described above.

One afternoon, when she had mourned for her son for many days, she took poison. Evidently she was very tired and depressed. Her

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



family suspected that she had taken the fruit although she showed none of the usual symptoms. One of her sons asked the missionary for help. As soon as she realized she had been discovered, she jumped up and vehemently denied having taken poison. The son insisted that she had and that she was trying to deceive her family and the missionary. To make sure that she was in no danger, the missionary decided to give her an emetic. The old woman struggled violently, throwing off everyone who approached her; only after an hour's strenuous fight was she overcome and forced to take the purge. Of course her stomach contained large quantities of the poison, which she had timed very carefully to take effect early in the morning when everyone would be deep in sleep and, therefore, unaware of her condition. Had it not been for her son's persistence, she undoubtedly would have been found dead the next day. Her husband, who was devoted to her, appeared to be quite unconcerned and, had the matter been left with him, would have done nothing to save her.

In general, love affairs are said to be the main cause of these suicides. They are particularly frequent on the occasions of the nightly dances which are closely connected with the sexual life of the Matako and at such times may take epidemic proportions. A young man will take poison for some reason and soon after others follow suit. Asked why they try to kill themselves, they explain that they feel compelled to do so by some superior force. The fruit attracts them; the desire to eat it becomes an obsession. When they walk in the bush their attention becomes riveted upon the fruit, which they see everywhere, until the temptation becomes too strong and they eat it.

Young boys at school are quite likely to take poison when they have been scolded by their teacher. For this reason the missionaries must exercise particular care to avoid offense when the poisonous fruit is ripe and, consequently, especially dangerous.

Actually there is a great deal of ostentation in these suicides. It is likely that many who take poison, do not take a fatal dose. Those who really wish to die generally take the poison secretly and try to conceal the fact until it is too late to help them. The others, on the contrary, boast about what they have done and are willing, even eager to get medical treatment.

This mania also has its simulators and fakers. Certain individuals imitate all the clinical symptoms, —convulsions, foaming, etc.— without having tasted the deadly fruit. Here again the desire to show off, to be the center of attention is foremost. Every suicide attempt provokes turmoil in the village and everyone flocks to the house where

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



the victim awaits death. It is said that some men take poison to blackmail a woman into complying with their wishes.

It has been noticed time and again that only young people eat sachasandia as a rule. Among the cases cited above there is only one of an elderly woman who attempted to take her life. In this connection, the question arises of whether suicides are more common among women than among men. No data on this point have been gathered, but it is the impression of the missionaries that suicide is equally common among men and women with perhaps a slight majority among women. The first problem raised by the frequency of these suicides is whether the suicides are caused by new conditions of life —by culture clash and lack, of adjustment to a new world— or whether they were equally frequent formerly when the native culture still functioned? Since no Matako group now lives in its earlier surroundings, the truth of the matter will be difficult to learn. If the problem is presented to the missionaries who are largely responsible for the disappearance of the Indian culture, they always insist that suicides were one of the worst manifestations of the culture before the Indians were saved. They point out, moreover, that the number of suicides was particularly high at the time when the missionaries began their work in the region, and they establish a close relation between suicide and dancing. One of the missionaries wrote to me: "In the old days when the Indians were still dancing, there used to be as many as a dozen attempted suicides in one day, resulting in my being up most of the night going from one to another. They were so many and so frequent, however, and it happened so long ago that I can remember none in detail". This evidence is confirmed by other missionaries who recall that the worst epidemics always occured in connection with the night dances which have a decidedly sexual character. At such times young married men who took part in the entertainments slept with girls, thus arousing the jealousy of their wives and the anger of their mothers-in law. If as a result one or two people committed suicide, others would follow their example.

The link established between night dances and suicide was the main reason for the strict tabu against dancing which is now enforced in every mission. Indians have been made so aware of the evil of dancing that even little girls have been kept from their normal and charming jumping about. Missionaries, however, are not responsible for this measure; it has been self-imposed by the Indians.

No cases of suicide are known among other tribes who live in the same region and under similar conditions. At any rate, I have never

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



been told about a Toba or a Pilaga who killed himself. Apparently, suicide is a culture trait restricted to the Matako.

Can this pathological condition be attributed to the life in the mission and to the discipline imposed upon the natives who have shown willingness to become Christians? The psychological motivation for conversion is undoubtedly fear of the white men and hunger. The missions are a buffer between the Indians and the ruthless white colonists. In the missions the Indians find jobs and, in case of distress, food. They also receive free medical treatment. The price they must pay for these privileges is to give up dancing and drinking, to abandon warfare and native sports and to forget shamanism. In addition they are expected to go to church twice daily and the children and many adults spend part of the day in school. Life under such conditions is extremely dull. All the activities that made life worth while disappear unless they can secretly play hockey or indulge in a drinking bout. This, of course, they quite frequently do. Although their present situation can explain their indifference, their anxieties and their lack of attachment to life, can the mission discipline be held responsble for the Metako suicidal mania?

In six of the cases cited above, marital maladjustment was blamed for the suicide attempt. In one case, the suicide was attributed to lack of sexual gratification. One couple attempted suicide because of the insults showered upon them by an angry and frustrated woman. One case may be ascribed both to sexual maladjustment and fear (the case of Martin). Criticism by neighbors is the cause in one instance. In only one case that of the old woman who had lost her son, can grief be considered the determining reason for the suicide.

In addition, there is no doubt that suicide among these people has a decidedly aggressive character. The Matako use suicide as a threat; by killing themselves, they punish the person who has offended them. The punitive character of suicide leads to the problem of aggression and aggressiveness among these people. In daily life little direct aggression is shown in their mutual relations. There are almost no quarrels; ordinarily men are not harsh to the women. Children are coddled and are seldom scolded. Nevertheless, strong aggresive tendencies exist. Whoever has witnessed a hockey party on the Pilcomayo loses any illusion he may have had about the gentleness and softness of Matako manners. In its brutality and fierceness each hockey party resembles a pitched battle. The Indians paint themselves and dress as if they were getting ready to face a real enemy. The teams are formed by men who are related by blood or who live in the same community. The adversaries are frequently members of bands which are on unfriendly

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



terms. Every party ends with broken limbs, smashed skulls or at least with black and blue marks. The fact that they gamble for high stakes on the outcome contributes to the violence of the party and to the passionate ardor of the players.

Aggressiveness finds another outlet in drinking bouts. Fights are so intimately associated with these alcoholic enjoyments that, before a party begins, the chief gives a long talk in which he exhorts the men to refrain from violence and to have a good time in peace and harmony. When the men begin to get inebriated the women conceal the weapons in the bush. Despite these precautions, quarrels and fights are rather common. Men remember slights and insults delivered months before and belatedly challenge the offender. Threats are exchanged and hard words are followed by acts of violence.

Formerly, of course, suppressed bad feelings found an outlet in the practice of black magic and aggressive personalities were able to indulge in regular warfare and scalping parties.

In order to maintain discipline and to prevent violence, missionaries have prohibited hockey, drinking and, of course, witchcraft and warfare. As a result there is in modern Matako society no institutionalized means for any person to give vent to his feelings of anger and aggression. Suicide is the only way open to punish the offender.

It is possible that interest in life itself decreases as the Indian is progressively prevented from carrying on any of his former activities. In addition, he is faced with increasingly difficult economic problems. The struggle for life is harsher and the conditions more humiliating. The Indians are well aware that they are the underdogs.

In a general way, we may say that the Matako have no resilience. They are abused, down trodden by the whites but rarely revolt. They accept their lot with abject resignation. Why should they bother, is their attitude; since the white man has come it has always been the same. Missionaries say that they rarely resist temptation; a man who for years has been a good Christian, "sins" at the first opportunity. Moreover, the Matako are decidedly unaquisitive; they give away for trifles the very objects for which they have worked for months in the sugar cane factories. They do not even bother to increase their small herds. Such indifference to possessions increases with old age. An old man asked, "Why should I bother to get more goats, since I am about to die? This behavior undoubtedly carries over from the past when the property of the dead was destroyed.

Nevertheless, since similar conditions prevail among other Indian groups without provoking a comparable predilection for suicide, the

6:Métraux E-5 (no date) 1943 SI7 Mataco SI7



most that can be said is that the mania found a suitable climate for continuation in that atmosphere of disintegration and pessimism. It must be remembered that similar crises have been observed from the very beginning of the missionary era. It may well be, therefore, that suicide was an institutionalized form of protest under the conditions of the earlier culture undertaken for some concrete reason by one individual who could not otherwise effectively punish members of the ingroup, and followed by others whose desires were kindled by the first example.

Suicides seem to have occurred with relative frequency among the Kaingang who were gathered on a reservation in the State of Sao Paulo. Since in certain cases they seem to have been caused by analogous situations to those found among the Matako, the following passage by Manizer may be of interest: "Suicides caused by family quarrels are very common. I know of several cases: Cagndiri attempted to hang herself because of some affair with her husband's brother; for that reason she was expelled from home. Vangrikuiix tried to hang herself when her husband planned to abandon her. Naxo's wife hanged herself to death because of an affair with her husband's brother, quite a young man. Old Karege's son killed himself by hanging after a quarrel with his wife who had refused to eat palmito which he had brought back trom the forest. There were two other cases of suicide during the two years the Kaingang were under supervision."[1]

The cases of suicide among South American natives listed by Wisse, in his book "Selbstmord und Todesfurcht bei den Naturvolkern" (Zutphen, 1933) are based on vague references in the travel literature of the last century and as a rule are valueless for science.

[1] Les Kaingangs, 23th International Congress of Americanists, New York, 1928, p. 760-761.